The political and economic changes in Germany as a laboratory for lifespan psychology – The CADS in Jena

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Reports from the Lab

The Political and Economic Changes in Germany as a Laboratory for Lifespan Psychology—The CADS in Jena

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The radical political and economic transformation of the 1990s that occurred in various parts of the world, particularly in Europe and Asia, found the social and behavioral sciences rather unprepared. A case in point is the reaction by psychological researchers to German unification after the breakdown of communist rule in 1989. Given the apparently tremendous differences between eastern and western Germany in the political and economic realms (freedom versus command, as some used to say), the first studies attempted to demonstrate presumed negative consequences of unification on the well-being and health of residents of eastern Germany, by comparing samples from the two parts of the country soon after unification. Unexpectedly, the differences found were small, if significant at all, and some even pointed in the 'wrong' direction.

Only after this disappointment did researchers began to re-think theoretical concepts about the transformation of a political system and the conditions under which such change may have an influence on the behavior and development of the people. For our part, we in the Center for Applied Developmental Science (CADS) at the University of Jena (located in the East of Germany, with 450 years of history and roots in the Protestant reformation) took part in a Collaborative Research Center (SFB 580) project titled 'Social Development in Post-Socialist Societies', funded by the German National Science Foundation (DFG) starting in 2000, and mainly comprising various social sciences. Although the conceptual depth of the collaboration with other disciplines, such as sociology, took some time to emerge, it has been an exciting experience.

Rainer K. Silbereisen and his Research Team (from left to right): Rainer K. Silbereisen, Sebastian Grümer (front row), Martin J. Tomasik, Astrid Körner, Claudia Recksiedler (middle row), Anja Blumenthal, Matthias Reitzle, Monique Landberg (back row)

Growing up in East Germany before unification meant a relatively stable and protected life, with few but secure options for one's career. This came, however, at the price of freedom for self-expression in public life, the growing gap between the East's technological advances and those of the Western world, and the extreme difficulty in obtaining consumer goods and other life commodities. In this regard, unification left people in the East unprepared for the profound economic strains that were about to occur and which were to be exacerbated by the uncertainties looming for the entire country through globalization and the subsequent structural crises that hit first the physical economy and more recently the financial markets. Even 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, differences still exist between the former East and West, particularly concerning the amount of welfare support people in the East expect from the government compared to what they see as their own responsibility.

Whereas a leading paradigm in sociology and allied disciplines holds that the process of German unification can be explained as a 'catch-up' modernization of societal institutions (e.g., central planning and command from above as a principle of economic activity seemed maladaptive for the era of globalization), our colleagues in the SFB 580 pointed out that this approach did not account for the full range of conditions resulting from unification which, it was held, could better be explained by factors such as the actual challenges experienced by different groups of the population and by the variation of responses, which also depended on variations in resources such as job opportunities and the educational level of residents. An approach to German unification described as the Challenge-Response Model of Social Change documented the choices made by various groups of people depending, for instance, on the flexibility of the new institutional order they encountered and the readiness for change among those groups affected. Moreover, as not all consequences would turn out to be benign in the long run, new challenges would emerge ('post-transformation') that called for new responses, sometimes almost implying a reinvention of the solutions to replace those the old political system had achieved. Such a process has no definite end, and the initial sequence of change followed by second order change to overcome unintended consequences of the responses seems to represent the "logic" of political and economic transformation. It also became clear that, although other societies in the process of transformation (e.g., successor states of the former Soviet Union, Vietnam, or China) were in the process of finding their own solutions, the conceptualization of change mechanisms in terms of challenge and response could also be generalized to apply to more gradual change of encountered by more stable economic systems.

Given these manifold changes on the societal level, it is

not surprising that the bulk of the SFB 580 research projects refer to issues such as the restructuring of the former East German workforce. A prominent example concerns the world of work. The loss of markets, particularly in Eastern Europe, resulted in downsizing and wide-scale unemployment, and in order to compensate for the increasing volatility of the economy, restructured and privatized firms replaced substantial parts of the remaining workforce by 'externalized' labor provided by international temporary work agencies. At the same time, the role of firms as welfare providers for their employees was reduced, with social services such as company-run day-care and kindergartens often being outsourced to the community or to private enterprise. The irony is that all these changes caused a reaction after several years, because the rapid pace of innovation also required a highly skilled work force of experts that needed to be attracted by benefits, such day care for families with young children. This example illustrates a general feature of German unification in times of globalization—the radical structural changes in the economy and in political representation led to overambitious adjustments that required corrections, and sometimes going 'back to square one'. Among the many other issues dealt with in the SFB 580 are the consequences of the transfer of the West German model of welfare institutions or the gradual change of political elites in the transition from the communist system to a social democratic approach, resulting in an unintended cleavage between the new elites and ordinary people in the East who have remained sceptical concerning the erosion of past beliefs and habits.

The role of the psychologists was to identify the individual experiences related to the macro changes and, by utilizing ideas characteristic of life-course sociology and lifespan psychology, predict and explain the implications of the responses for psychological functioning. What the political changes meant was a reshuffling of the societal scaffolding by which people negotiated their lives. An important insight of our investigation was that many aspects of societal functions were not actually changed at all, and although psychological effects were sometimes tumultuous, they were often circumscribed and limited to behaviors and aspects of psychosocial development that were influenced by social institutions. An example is the influence of schools or firms that underwent change during the political and economic transformation.

The conceptual backdrop of challenge-response on the macro level reminded us psychologists of structurally equivalent approaches under the general rubric of stress and coping. The notion was that the everyday manifestations of societal challenges at the individual level (henceforth called demands) represent the kind of experiences (ranging from sometimes crippling uncertainties, to opportunities for new behaviors) that lead to coping behaviors, reminiscent of the societal responses mentioned by our colleagues from the other social sciences. For them, the attraction lay in the promise to investigate the individual behaviors that not only represent reactions to the new challenges, but that also set the starting point for ultimate changes on the societal level, thus bridging aggregate level change across time by the behavior and development of individuals and groups. For us, the attraction was that we had an elaborate system of societal contexts and their dynamics at hand which, in theory (but until now rarely in practice) are taken as important for a conceptualization of the contexts which developing individuals negotiate.

As already mentioned, the collaboration within the SFB 580 was no accident—actually, I and my colleagues at the CADS, and its predecessors at my former universities, had a long history of working on 'development as action in context' with models that focus on demands rooted in contextual change and that focus on action related to these demands as the central change mechanism. Inspired by Glen Elders's 'control cycle' model, we investigated how people dealt with economic hardship in Berlin and Warsaw in the early 1980s, and later in the former East and West Germany after unification; obviously this approach was also instrumental in our new line of research. As the range of topic-specific reactions to the multitude of transformation-related demands seemed endless, we relied instead on a model of developmental regulation (by Jutta Heckhausen and colleagues) that linked situational reactions to demands with long-term developmental changes. Other researchers relevant for our translation of the challenge-response model to individual behavior and development were Melvin Kohn and his series of studies on self-direction under conditions of societal change, from Poland and the Ukraine to China. And of course Stevan Hobfoll was relevant with his emphasis on resource loss as a consequence of system transformation.

Together with Martin Pinquart and others we developed a model (see Figure 1) that has guided our research since the beginning of our collaboration with the economists, political scientists and especially the sociologists enrolled in the SFB 580. According to the model, our foremost task was to gather a representative subset of demands in work, family, and public life that are characteristic of the early 2000s in both parts of Germany (meanwhile this research has inspired similar studies in Poland and Italy, thereby initiating an investigation into its generalizability). As the study is longitudinal (currently the forth annual wave is under way), and as we also cover age groups from early to middle adulthood, we took pains not to confound emerging uncertainties related to the post-transformation situation with normative age-related demands and their change. The results were straightforward—particularly in the domain of workers living in the former communist East of the country who experienced a higher level of negative changes related to growing uncertainty concerning their job and career prospects. This effect was net of other potentially overlaying sources, such as the higher unemployment rate in the eastern part of the country. Moreover, the demands in the domain of work revealed a carry-over effect to the domain of family, in spite of the fact that family demands were more influenced by the societal challenges of individualization than by those of globalization.

Reminiscent of the theoretically ill-conceived early attempts to demonstrate a link between the East-West divide and differential well-being, we applied updated methodology to determine whether higher demand loads would correspond to lower well-being. Although the expected linkage was found, it requires a number of theoretical qualifications. First, how people cope with demands plays a role. On average, higher demands result in a higher level of engagement-type of responses (e.g., actively searching for a solution), and this in turn corresponds to higher

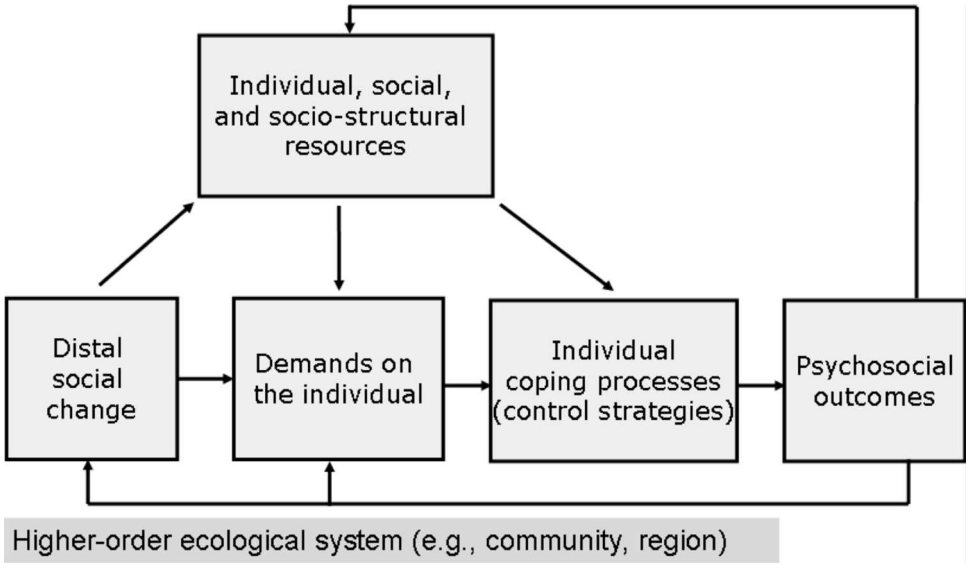

Figure 1. Theoretical model

levels of well-being. However, where the demand load was very high and opportunities were few (assessed via characteristics of the context; see below) disengagement (e.g., giving up or even blaming others) was a preferable method of maintaining one's mental health.

Second, the direct relationship between demands, coping, and well-being, as already described, holds on average. However, on closer examination, the situation is much more complicated, to the satisfaction of our colleagues from the social sciences. Our design allows the paralleling our individual-level data with aggregate-level statistics on economic prosperity. Thus, in a multilevel modelling approach, we were able to investigate, for instance, whether the relationship between demand load and well-being varied as a function of the economic situation in the wider region where the people lived. Results showed that, in economically precarious regions, people facing higher loads of uncertainty demands in work or family were better off than similarly challenged people in prosperous regions. This was also true in spite of the fact that in the less prosperous regions engagement coping was lower, probably due to fewer relevant behavioral models. How can such impressive context moderation be explained? We had two guesses that were confirmed (note, however, that the data are correlational and, so far, only concurrent data have been analyzed). Attributions of the effect of negative demands on society at large rather than on individuals' behavior seemed to play a role, and it was also relevant that people in these regions made self-serving social comparisons of their own situations to the situation of those who were doing even worse. Similar results, but without individual assessments, are known from economic research on well-being and unemployment rates.

There are other important results, and we look forward to many more in the future when we will expand the age-range studied to include the retirement years. Collaboration will also be a key next step when we will analyze particular positive phenomena, such as entrepreneurship or civic engagement, and investigate how they are influenced by social change. Meanwhile, others have also realized the necessity to study the individual level manifestations of social change, rather than merely comparing samples presumed to represent different stages in a transformation process, and thereby overlooking the tremendous variation in exposure to new challenges.

One of the most impressive effects of interdisciplinary collaboration is that it inspires the development of further similar projects. Based on the (current) Jena Study on Social Change and Human Development and the entire research program of the CADS (basic, applied and translational research on human adaptation to challenges, often with an emphasis on motivational processes), we have become part of other, even more comprehensive endeavors related to social change. Examples are the recent "PATHWAYS" collaboration (comprising various European and U.S. universities and research institutes) with the aim of investigating life course transitions under conditions of social change (http://www.jacobsfoundation.org/cms/index.php?id=414), or the International Graduate School of Social and Behavioural Change (GSBC) at the University of Jena, a research and doctoral studies program that encompasses economics, psychology, sociology, and ethics, and which focuses on economic changes and their impact on lifespan development (http://www.gsbc.uni-jena.de). New collaborations within ISSBD concerning the effects of economic change in China have also begun.

Further information on this research program and its conceptual basis can be found in Pinquart and Silbereisen (2004) and Silbereisen (2005). A first full account in German of the entire psychological research project appeared in a book edited by Silbereisen and Pinquart (2008). A chapter in a forthcoming book edited by Silbereisen and Chen (in press) provides an overview of recent results, and also refers to journal articles that have been published to date (a full publication list can be found on the web at http://www2.uni-jena.de/svw/devpsy/projects/sfb580.html).

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The Centre for Human Development and Ageing at Loughborough University, UK: Maternal and Child Health in the Context of Social, Economic, and Political Change

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The Centre evolved during the last decade within the Department of Human Sciences at Loughborough University in the United Kingdom. The Department of Human Sciences was itself created from a background in cybernetics and ergonomics during the 1970s. From that very technical base the field of Human Biology emerged, grounded initially in functional anatomy and latterly in nutrition. The late Dr. Nicholas Norgan (1941–2006) was instrumental in developing a research interest in international nutrition following his Ph.D. research that had been carried out in Papua New Guinea. In 1996 Noël Cameron was recruited from his position as Professor of Anatomy & Human Biology in Johannesburg, South Africa to take the post of Professor of Human Biology at Loughborough. Professor Cameron obtained his Ph.D. in Medicine in 1977, under the supervision of James Tanner, at London University's Institute of Child Health, where he specialized in the normal and abnormal growth and development of children.

Noël Cameron's research in South Africa between 1984 and 1997 coincided with the end of apartheid and the emergence of a non-racial, post-apartheid democracy. However, 50 years of segregation and discrimination had resulted in wide disparities in all aspects of life within South Africa based almost exclusively on the color of one's skin. Whilst racial segregation was not uncommon in the 20th century, the South African experience of apartheid was the subject of particular international condemnation. In 1948, the National Party of South Africa ran for election on the platform of separate development ("apartheid" in Afrikaans). Its Group Areas Act (1950) defined four "population groups" (White, Black, Asian, and Coloured), which would be subject to separation in place of habitation, sexual and marital partners, health care, education, and labor market access. Whilst "high apartheid" was entrenched in South African society, by the 1980s, signs of change were becoming increasingly apparent. In addition to national and international protest, and in direct opposition to the regulations of apartheid, population movement was occurring on an unprecedented scale, with 14 million blacks predicted to move into urban areas by 2000, and urban areas to double in size by 2010. Within this rapidly changing socio-political scenario in South Africa, research related to maternal and child health changed from the paternalistic imposition of research themes to self-imposed and externally mediated provisions for community control over thematic research. The identification of appropriate research questions and outcomes resulted from a conversation with the *participants in the research* rather than an edict to the *subjects of the research*.

A Short Description of Selected Research Projects

Birth to Twenty Cohort Study. It was against this socio-political background and philosophical justification that Cameron's research projects in human growth and development were initiated. In hindsight the most important study was the Birth to Twenty (Bt20) birth cohort study started in 1990. Between April and June 1990 all the women giving birth in Soweto and Johanesburg were invited to participate in this study. From its inception Bt20 was planned to be multidisciplinary, tracking the growth, health, wellbeing and educational progress of urban children across the first decade of their life. It is now a 20-year prospective longitudinal cohort study of 3,273 children and their families of whom more than 70 percent have been followed up to age 17 years. It is the largest and longest running study of child and youth development in Africa, and one of the few large-scale longitudinal studies of its kind in the world. It is linked with comparable studies in Pelotas (Brazil), Guatemala, Delhi and the Philippines through the Consortium of Health Outcome Research in Transitional Societies (COHORTS). In 1990 almost 700 participants in Bt20 were invited to participate in a more intense investigation of factors affecting bone health. The Bt20 and Bone Health studies form the basis for much of our research which are outlined below, but new initiatives in the UK provide interesting opportunities for future research.

Nutritional Transition. The population of Soweto has been dealing with the nutritional transition and this is especially true of the adolescents as they move from traditional diets to "western" diets. We have studies monitoring this change and its effect on growth and pubertal development. Importantly we are using both qualitative and quantitative methods to understand this shift in behavior i.e. we are not just measuring dietary intake but we have also conducted focus group discussions with adolescents and their carers to try to understand what causes behavioral change. This project is conducted in collaboration with Dr. Chiedza Zingoni, and the Bone Mineral Metabolism Unit of the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa.

Urbanization, Socio-economic Status and Child Growth. Bt20 provides an extensive database from which we have been able to study the effect of the urban environment on the